

BEST NC Remarks to House Education Appropriations Committee

May 5, 2016

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and to the Committee for allowing us to speak today about BEST NC's priorities and the 2016 education budget.

On behalf of the more than 125 business leaders from across the state who make up BEST NC's membership, I first want to thank you for your commitment to having a thoughtful conversation about education in North Carolina.

We firmly believe that North Carolina can have the best education system in the nation. We also know that despite the hard work of educators every day – from pre-K through post-graduate – our education system is not yet allowing every student to meet their full potential.

BEST NC's top priorities are based on the basic belief that any organization is only as good as its talent and how well they are supported – it's true in our businesses and also true for education. We also believe that resources should be targeted where they are needed most. This means focusing on attracting and retaining the best possible educators and focusing both policies and funding on supporting underperforming students and schools.

First, we believe teachers deserve to be treated professionally and this includes competitive compensation. You have made solid strides toward this over the past two years, particularly in raising the base starting pay to a minimum of \$35,000 plus benefits. We hope you will continue that trend with a focus on where the needs are greatest.

Specifically, while we believe the entire salary schedule should have a cost of living increase, we encourage you to *make the largest investments in early-career teachers*. This is a strategic investment of resources in support of student achievement. This approach will help recruit top talent to the profession, address the turnover rate among early-career teachers which is twice that of career educators, and enable teachers to earn more, faster, so they can support their families.

Your two-year strategy on starting pay was a good one and we encourage you to consider that approach again by setting another *multi-year goal for raising teacher pay*. Giving teachers a preview of where you would like pay to go, even if you can't do it all in one year, could help keep even more teachers in the profession.

Second, in addition to continuing to raise teacher pay, we hope you will aggressively improve principal compensation. Our principal turnover in North Carolina is one of the highest in the nation, and average salaries are almost the lowest. Great principals, as you know, make everything else possible. We support a significant increase in principal and assistant principal pay this year, as well as a commitment to study and reform the way North Carolina pays school administrators, in order to better align with student needs.

As a third priority, I want to say that we couldn't have been more thrilled with the initial investment you made last year to transform principal preparation in our state. You launched a program that will dramatically increase both the rigor and relevance of how we recruit and train school leaders in North Carolina. I cannot overstate the importance of this initiative. Systems that have taken this approach have seen dramatic and rapid student achievement improvements, particularly in closing achievement gaps. If there is one best way to address low-performing schools – it is to recruit world-class talent to lead them (and every school in our state).

Fourth, we encourage you to support school districts that want to create career pathways for teachers so they distribute leadership throughout the school. We believe the structure of the teaching profession today is outdated, making principals' jobs untenable and preventing teachers from being supported and advancing in their careers the way their peers can in other professions. As you consider strategies around differentiated pay, we first ask you to prioritize solutions that empower teachers and recognize the true professionals they are, leveraging their leadership capacity rather than focusing on performance bonuses. This will take time for districts to develop, so the short-term strategy should be around empowering districts to design those models, while focusing this year's pay increases in the base salary schedule.

Finally, we all know we have a growing teacher shortage in North Carolina, just like other states, but especially in high-poverty schools, STEM subjects and special education. We appreciate the work you have already done on an updated teacher scholarship program to recruit new teacher candidates into high-need schools and hard-to-staff subjects. We encourage you to make that type of recruitment program a reality this year in North Carolina. Superintendents tell us that the pressures of a dramatically reduced applicant pool are putting great stress on their schools. The students in those classrooms can't afford to have a patchwork of teachers. We need well-prepared teachers in every classroom – it is not just a constitutional obligation. For students who are not prepared for work and life – and the businesses that want to hire them – it is also an economic obligation.

As business leaders, we are committed to high standards and accountability for all students, digital learning to provide a personalized education, and directing resources where they are needed most. As you can tell from my remarks today, though, elevating educators is our top priority. None of the rest of what we hope for can happen without great talent. And as you look at PreK, Community Colleges and the University System, we hope educators and access are your top priorities there as well.

Investing in educators is simply the best investment we can make on behalf of North Carolina students.

Thank you.